

## CALL AND RESPONSE

### Who Is the World?: Reflections on Music and Politics Twenty Years after Live Aid

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“Who Is the World?” was a *Journal of Popular Music Studies (JPMS)*-sponsored online discussion moderated by *JPMS* editor Reebee Garofalo that took place April 14–29, 2005, prior to the Live 8 events that were staged to confront the G8 nations in July. The purpose of this discussion was to revisit the intersection of music and politics on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the “charity rock” phenomenon and to consider its future in the post-9/11 context. The participants include Billy Bragg, Tiffiniy Cheng, Susan Fast, Simon Frith, Holly George-Warren, Karen Pegley, and Will Straw.

—The Editors

#### About the Contributors

**BILLY BRAGG** was recently described by *The Times* newspaper as a “national treasure.” In the two decades of his career, Bragg has certainly made an indelible mark on the conscience of British music, becoming perhaps the most stalwart guardian of the radical dissenting tradition that stretches back over centuries of the country’s political, cultural, and social history.

**TIFFINIY CHENG** has worked as a sustainability research assistant and taught urban planning at an inner-city high school in Philadelphia. She is the founder of Participatory Politics and currently works with Downhill Battle, a nonprofit organization working to support participatory culture and build a fairer music industry.

**SUSAN FAST** is an associate professor of music and acting director of Women’s Studies at McMaster University in Ontario, Canada. She is the author of *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* (Oxford University Press, 2001). She is currently working on a

monograph on benefit concerts with Karen Pegley, as well as on a project focused on the representations of race and gender in mainstream popular music.

**SIMON FRITH** is a professor of film and media at the University of Stirling in Scotland. His most recent publication is *Music and Copyright*, edited with Lee Marshal for Edinburgh University Press. He is still an occasional journalist, writing for the *Glasgow Sunday Herald*, most recently about the anniversary of Live Aid. He chairs the judges of the Mercury Music Prize.

**REEBEE GAROFALO** is a professor at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, where he is affiliated with the American Studies and Community Media and Technology programs. He is an editor of the *JPMS* as well as many other music-related journals. His most recent books are *Policing Pop* (edited with Martin Cloonan) and *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA*.

**HOLLY GEORGE-WARREN** is the editor of a forthcoming book on Farm Aid (Rodale, Fall 2005), as well as the editor or author of numerous other books on music and popular culture, including *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll*, *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats*, and *Shake, Rattle & Roll: The Pioneers of Rock & Roll*. Her writing has also appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, *Rolling Stone*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and the *Journal of Country Music*.

**KAREN PEGLEY** is an associate professor of music at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada. Her book, *MTV and MuchMusic: National Identities, Cultural Boundaries and Global Flows*, is forthcoming from Wesleyan University Press.

**WILL STRAW** is an associate professor in communications at McGill University in Montreal. He is the author of the forthcoming *Popular Music: Scenes and Sensibilities* (Duke University Press, 2006) and over fifty articles on music, film, and culture.

**Opening Statement Posted by Reebee Garofalo, April 14, 2005, 4:45 P.M.**

For many people who follow popular music, 1985—the year of Live Aid and “We Are the World”—is remembered as the defining moment in the phenomenon dubbed “charity rock.” Praised for its humanitarian impulse and fundraising potential and blasted for trivializing important issues, this marriage of music and activism was controversial from the moment it began. At the same time, charity rock opened up cultural spaces that were

unthinkable even a few years earlier. Just as "We Are the World" prompted Africa-focused all-star recordings all over the world and begot the more radical "Sun City," which challenged apartheid in South Africa, Live Aid opened the door to more radical mega-events such as the two Nelson Mandela tribute concerts and the two Amnesty International tours, which targeted the plight of political prisoners. Farm Aid, which was launched from the Live Aid stage in Philadelphia, applied the power of music and activism in its own US backyard and has been battling the negative impacts of corporate farming ever since. By the end of the 1980s, there was scarcely a progressive social issue that had not become the theme for a fundraising concert or the subject of a popular song or both—environmental issues, homelessness, child abuse, racism, and AIDS, to name a few. Can we say that collectively these events contributed to a more politicized popular culture? And, if so, how would we describe its character, then and now?

While the mega-events of the 1980s were international in scope, the devastation of 9/11 made the United States a central focus of music and activism. In the aftermath of 9/11, musicians once again rallied to the cause of a pressing social issue. But these events seemed to mark a new role for popular music. If the mega-events of the 1980s were about critique or opposition, post-9/11 events such as *America: A Tribute to Heroes* and the *Concert for New York City* were more about healing and nation-building. Only a few, such as the Beastie Boys' *New Yorkers against Violence* concert and the Canadian *Music without Borders Live*, offered an alternative perspective. And, if the left-leaning spirit of charity rock was still evident in US electoral politics in the Tell Us the Truth tour and the work of organizations such as Musicians United to Win without War, the Hip Hop Summit Action Network, and PunkVoter.com, what can be said about the Rallies for America sponsored by Clear Channel or the patriotic country anthems that dominated the US airwaves during the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq?

Finally, I would note that, twenty years later, musical activism has become more expansive. While the issues of social justice (however they are defined) are still on the agenda—Live 8 proposed to "make poverty history"—they share the stage with significant issues surrounding the production and dissemination of popular music itself. As if to provide counterpoint to the humanitarianism of charity rock, 1985 was also the year of the Parents Music Resource Center hearings, which yielded the Parental Guidance sticker that labels a CD that is in any way controversial. Since that time, attempts to regulate popular music have taken activism into the heady territory of telecom policy, media concentration, freedom

of expression, and copyright law. In this terrain the cutting edge of music activism has been taken up by organizations such as the Future of Music Coalition and Downhill Battle. Often the same musicians are involved in all of these struggles. At times they are divided. Is this work part of the legacy that began with charity rock twenty years ago? If so, how do all these issues connect?

In twenty years of music and activism, popular music and culture have clearly been established as contested terrain. But who is winning the contest? What of this legacy do we criticize? What is there to celebrate? Where will the future of music and activism take us? Let's begin by addressing this latter set of questions, then move to the other themes as they come up in discussion.

**Reply to Reebee Garofalo Posted by Simon Frith on April 18, 2005, 5:44 P.M.**

I think you have covered all the issues here—certainly a lot to write about. To start things rolling, I would just like to ask for some conceptual clarifications.

First, is making music for charity necessarily a political activity? Music has been used for good causes at a local level for as long as I can remember—all sorts of music, all sorts of causes, some more obviously political than others (supporting a homeless campaigning group or local left magazine as against raising money for a television in a children's hospital ward or a community swimming pool). How does the meaning of such activities change when they are mass mediated?

Second, there seems to be a difference (a political and an aesthetic difference) between events which are designed to be inclusive—pulling everyone in, like Live Aid, and events which are exclusive—keeping certain people out, as in Anti-Nazi League gigs. Inclusive events, by their nature, downplay politics.

Third, I think people do distinguish between events that somehow express the views of the performers and those in which the musicians seem to be there because it is a good career move (a problem I had with both the original and the recent Live Aid records). I remain sympathetic to Greil Marcus's original comment on "We Are the World," that it sounded more like an advert for Pepsi than anything else.

The question I would like to add to Reebee's then is whether there is any relationship at all between the quality of the music and the nature of the cause!

**Reply to Simon Frith Posted by Billy Bragg on April 19, 2005, 2:27 P.M.**

Is making music for charity necessarily a political activity? I do not think so. There is not much politics involved in doing a tsunami benefit—it is a matter of compassion. You could argue that Live Aid as an event leaned more toward the compassionate than the political, directed as it was at helping people in desperate need of resources rather than seeking to address how we, the world, distribute said resources.

Addressing your second question, I think you have chosen the wrong terms to differentiate between Live Aid and an Anti-Nazi League gig. The former is a compassionate event that most people can gather around and support—such as feeding kids in Africa—while the latter I would consider to be a political event.

I accept that it is not always easy to fit concerts into such definitions—I thought the Mandela Freedom Festival was an anti-racist gig, but on TV it was presented much like Live Aid.

Your third question probes a touchy subject—do artists decide to perform at the big charity gigs for the cause or the coverage?

**Reply to Simon Frith and Billy Bragg Posted by Reebee Garofalo on April 19, 2005, 11:29 P.M.**

I agree with Simon that using music for “good causes” certainly predates charity rock. The difference is that 1985 gave it a name, and in naming it, created a historical frame for this kind of work. And, as Billy notes, that frame “leaned more toward the compassionate than the political.” Some of the work mentioned in the opening statement evokes this frame while some does not. So my question is: Where do you position yourself and the work you do in relation to this historical frame? Has it provided a platform for projects and events you support or has it gotten in the way?

**Comments Posted by Will Straw on April 20, 2005, 11:29 A.M.**

In most respects, my feelings about charity rock events are the same now as in 1985. That is, I think we become too bogged down in worrying that musicians who participate might receive unearned credibility for doing so or that they might be supporting a cause they do not really and fully understand. If the cause is a good one, nothing seems to me more trivial (or unimportant to the victims of whatever calamity inspired the

event) than the possibility that a performer might earn some undeserved credibility or have an imperfect understanding of the problem.

That is the first of my curmudgeonly thoughts. Now, on to the others . . .

On the broader question of popular music's politics . . . I am fascinated by the different directions these politics take in different national contexts. Nothing has fired up US fans and musicians as much as censorship or challenges to the right to download and share music. Opposition to censorship has become much more about the right to buy whatever you want than the right to say whatever you want. The key British battles in the last ten to fifteen years seem to have been about the right to occupy particular spaces (warehouses and fields) for various collective musical events. In Canada, bits of both of these impulses are at play, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the politics of music in Canada still center to a great extent on support for Canadian musicians and a national industry.

The big, collective cause-oriented music events in Canada over the last few years have tended to be affirmative, rather than compassionate or polemical—like the SARS concert in Toronto a couple of years ago, which had no purpose but to show the world that the Rolling Stones were not afraid to visit the city—so why should you be? Or like the Canada Day concerts in Ottawa each year, in which Big Rock performers (from the Guess Who through the Tragically Hip) fuel a kind of frat-boy nationalism.

I am more and more intrigued by the extent to which any conception of music-as-labor seems to have dropped out of the politics of popular music. For the first seventy years of the last century, musicians' struggles to be paid for their work, reasonable working conditions, and collective bargaining fought valiantly against the public perception that music came out of thin air or was not the result of any real work. Musicians' unions were important in building a broader labor movement; they helped politicize large sectors of the cultural field. When they performed in cause-oriented concerts, it was partly as members of a labor movement that they did so.

Musicians' unions were often corrupt, of course, and notoriously conservative vis-à-vis the introduction of new technologies. But legitimate concerns over the disappearance of a public domain in recent years have segued too easily into the perception that music and other expressive forms are everyone's property because they are a form of social discourse,

which simply floats out there. Music is cultural speech, and there should be no constraints on its circulation, but it is also the result of work and we do not have very interesting ideas about music-as-work right now. For musicians, to give away their labor in the 1930s might have meant they would be branded as scabs, breakers of a collective solidarity. Now, of course, giving it away is an ethical stance against the commodification of music. That might be the appropriate politics in the present conjuncture. Or it might represent the triumph of a consumerist conception of cultural rights over all others.

**Reply to Will Straw Posted by Tiffiny Cheng on April 24, 2005, 1:45 P.M.**

I would like to respond to the general question about whether charity rock is political and more specifically to Will's comments. Whether the person, tool, event, or thing intends to be political is obviously sometimes besides the point—music is a form of political discourse when some form of politics is involved, whether that be for politicizing the individual or for changing the political situation. On one level, popular musicians sway politics because of their celebrity, famous people can help change a lot of things but their intent does not matter—their ego is an entirely different issue from whether the effect is political or not. So, music can be political discourse; it enters culture this way often, and for one reason or another it has served that purpose and has affected people in a political way. When the political implications seem obvious to marketing strategists, corporations such as Clear Channel use the formula of celebrity + imaging = lasting political impression. But whoever jumps on that chance of creating a politics around music, the politics is affected when the music is positioned to do so for a particular country, time, discourse, and political system. Music can move people closer to feeling politics on an emotional level and this emotional politics is in itself political—that is why what Clear Channel does is so scary.

But not all attempts at effecting political change with music actually change the politics involved or change the way individuals reason out the distribution of resources and power. If music and the way people experience or use music put power in the hands of musicians and fans, or the political objects, that is political and we would say the politics is better. Filesharing does the political, whether or not the filesharers are politicized, because anybody and everybody can be a part of a system where they have distribution and marketing power. This system is

different from the current way of making it big with the major labels in that people can use this filesharing tool as a way to reach out to other people and create associations—the playing field now has effective tools to level out the resources and benefits for an industry. This means that current networking technology has an effect on a system in a political way—this is huge. Current models for voluntary collective licensing systems would absolutely level the playing field, and by fighting for such a system, people would be helping to put forth the musicians' labor movement.

On a similar note, filesharing is similar to charity rock because the attendees/participants are not necessarily politicized but the overall outcome can be political. Downhill Battle started its work because the major labels were saying that filesharing was solely about depriving an industry of money that currently benefits four major corporations. But we believe strongly that filesharing can bring great things to music because when everyone actually gets a chance at making music, music gets better and more diverse, music gets more local, and local music gets more national—this vision and what is happening now is certainly a shift in the politics of a music industry.

Political consciousness is extremely important here. Independent music is not necessarily political, and some parts are even apolitical. But now that there is a chance for independent music to gain more traction and more power, independent music is no longer political just because they are independently produced, but by virtue of what they are doing to the music industry and by virtue of their existence on filesharing networks and in our public spaces, they are shifting a percentage of the industry from corrupt, monopolistic practices to open, decentralized, public, meritocratic practices and can help shift the economics to independent music (in this case, the economy is the politics, thus we are led to politics). Examples of recent successes are M.I.A. and Conor Oberst. But our concern here is that the major labels are winning the war on who gets to own the music industry by dominating any debate on the labor, economics, and politics of music. This is why it is important to move independent musicians and fans and those who fileshare major label music toward consciousness of the political. It is as if there were a magical tool that put power into local and independent culture, but a giant corporate party drops a curtain on it. It is important for people to choose to be political about something as emotional and sometimes apolitical as music, because this consciousness leads to political change. (Art, in and of itself, may be political because it



is empowerment of the individual.) Events and phenomena such as file-sharing create moments of political awareness, politicization, and political progress—it just depends on how far people go with it to actually change the politics of the system. Perhaps these things can lead to depoliticization of a distributed politics when the politics themselves are satisfied or lead to an empowering, effective political discourse, but until then charity rock, music, and the industry itself will keep on being political in nature.

**Comments Posted by Susan Fast on April 20, 2005, 5:44 P.M.**

I would like to begin by asking what we mean by politics or what counts as “political” when it comes to “charity rock.” To respond to Will’s comment about the SARS concert in Toronto, was not it “political” for the Stones to come to the city in the midst of a health crisis that was driving people away? I want to say yes to this: it strikes me that part of the politics here is about “outsiders” telling the world (well, at least whoever cared to view the concert) what a great place Toronto is, and given the Stones’ history with the city (they have long rehearsed for tours there and then played a small club date as a warm-up for the tour), it was a bit like an old friend coming to the city’s aid in the time of need. It was also a validation for Canada (we struggle with our importance in the world). This is, in many respects, what happened at the *Concert for New York City*, a benefit that was broadcast on VH1 five weeks after 9/11. That concert became framed in the press as an event dominated by British rockers, especially Paul McCartney, The Who, Jagger and Richards, David Bowie, Eric Clapton, and Elton John. It was a bit like a second “British Invasion,” complete with some of the same performers. Lester Bangs brilliantly linked the hysteria around the Beatles’ coming to the United States in 1964 to the death of J.F.K.: they were a shot in the arm to a grieving nation. I see a parallel with what happened at the *Concert for New York City*: the Brits come to lighten the load and, again, to help out during a time of grieving.

But there are other social politics that are important to unpack around benefit concerts. Part of the work that Karen and I have been doing with respect to the 9/11 benefit concerts has been around representation. I am sure we all remember the criticisms that were leveled by journalists against the “whiteness” of Live Aid; not much has changed. The 9/11 concerts were dominated by white, male, rock-oriented performers—both those concerts held in the United States and the one in Canada. Why does this continue to be the case?

Karen and I have also been interested in exploring issues of national identity with respect to the 9/11 and the Tsunami benefit concerts recently held (Karen will probably have more to say about the latter), but there is plenty to say about this issue with respect to the SARS concert (and also the national Canada Day celebrations, which are not benefits, but which are fascinating in terms of national identity—Mark Duffett wrote a wonderful piece about this that was published in *Popular Music* a few years ago). In the *Concert for New York City*, which took place just as the US- and British-led coalition began bombing Afghanistan, it is significant that so many British acts would perform alongside Americans at the concert and that The Who's performance in particular would be visually dominated by shifting arrangements of the British and American flags—ending, importantly, with the US flag flanked on either side by a union jack. Pretty political for a concert that purported only to be a fundraiser for the World Trade Center victims.

I think Simon's point about events that are "inclusive" and "exclusive" is a very important one. How do we measure this inclusivity or exclusivity? For Karen and I, it has been important to look at who participates in the concert, at which point they perform (do they open the concert, close it, and get the longest or shortest set), how the performance is framed (with words or not, by an important actor or politician, by commercials—as in the MTV broadcast of Live Aid).

And, of course, what is the music like? I do not think there has been any work done that looks analytically at songs such as "We Are the World" or other of the anthems associated with benefits. I think in a way they might *need* to sound like Pepsi commercials (pace Simon!). They need to be immediately memorable and singable so they will appeal to a lot of people quickly; they need to be a bit sappy—the power ballad is a perfect genre—so they tug at the heart strings a little (the power ballad is also appropriate because it sounds so "big," not only because of the number of people who sing in these charity numbers, but because of the use of reverb). I wonder, also, how much it matters what they sound like: are people interested in these songs for the music or are they interested because so many celebrities participate? It might be useful to think of them in relationship to the finales that are almost always performed at these concerts: all, or at least many, of the "stars" who have participated file out on stage to do a musically dreadful rendition of some standard pop or rock song. Why is it important for this to happen? What are the politics at work here?

**Comments Posted by Simon Frith on April 22, 2005, 8:08 A.M.**

Further thoughts on charity rock (after reading Billy/Susan/Will):

1. There is certainly now a generic charity record with an unobtrusive but determined rock beat, soul-inflected sincere vocals, and a power balladic chorus line to pluck the heartstrings.
2. Charity records are not really for listening. Their appeal is as a kind of music quiz. Forget about the music, and spot the voices! It is Bono! Bob Dylan! Boy George!
3. When Bob Geldof put Band Aid together he was not interested in performers' musical or political values but their celebrity. They were on the record to generate publicity—not to attract the public directly but to build a market through the media. They were part of a sales drive, valuable because of their instantly recognizable image. They were not expected to sing about the issues.
4. These days large charities from UNESCO down employ celebrity experts, people whose job is to determine which star would be good for a charity's brand, to dream up ways in which they could be used, and to sweet talk or guilt-trip them into agreeing.
5. Charity events encourage consumers to spend their money a certain way—giving donations—by making them feel good about it, by making the transaction involve a sense of well-being, of belonging.
6. In *Is That It?* Geldof recalls explaining to Paul Weller (who wanted to recruit Band Aid performers to the Miners' cause) that he “had to keep Band Aid nonpolitical if it was to work properly.”
7. What made Live Aid different from the previous tradition of benefit gigs was that it changed the meaning of the musical charity show from a kind of community self-help, doing something about our problems, to a kind of populist noblesse oblige, doing something about them.
8. Politicians since Live Aid have certainly appreciated the photo opportunities of meeting rock stars. But they do not seem to pay much lasting attention to what they have to say. Was Band Aid, Geldof once asked, “a subversive phenomenon in that it wrested the political initiative from the parliamentary process into the hands of ordinary people?” I do not think so. Live Aid was a media event (which is why

it raised so much money). It involved populism—the media mobilization of public opinion—rather than activism.

9. Live Aid and its offshoots turned out to be an inspiring way to rally charity workers, the people in the field.
10. Political musical events, by this account, must make people want to do something more than hand over money—whether as a result of the nature of the music or the event or the cause. The question is what “something more” does this mean?

**Reply to Simon Frith Posted by Holly George-Warren on April 22, 2005, 2:56 P.M.**

Simon covered a lot of ground in his response to everyone’s postings, and I am going to respond very generally to his and others’ comments. I can think of a few specific politically driven artists who use mega-concerts on an ongoing basis to make political pronouncements, spur audience members on to action, and so on. Every time I see Steve Earle—either at Farm Aid, during the political tour he did with artists from Rage Against the Machine, and so on, or during his own concerts (the latter two are not mega-concerts, of course)—he brings his political beliefs to center stage. This passion of his has inspired much of his recent music—and he has written some of his best songs while inflamed over such issues as the death penalty, the problems dealt family farmers today due in part to a US political system that supports the needs of Big Business at the expense of all others’ health and well-being, and the war in Iraq and the Bush White House. Earle also brings these issues up when doing interviews around the release of a new album, and so on. He represents the very best aspects of “mega-concerts”—educating people, speaking out in a public forum for his beliefs, and actually making great music out of it. Not once a year but on an ongoing basis. Neil Young falls into this category as well. In addition, Willie Nelson and John Mellencamp (the other two, along with Young, original FA artist board members) have continued to work on an ongoing basis through various actions to support the cause that motivated the first FA concert in 1985. What began as an act of compassion regarding the Farm crisis in the 1980s turned into ongoing political action—a “process” that has more of a chance of making changes politically than a one-time “band aid” that raises a bunch of money during one event.

Several of the artists I have interviewed for the Farm Aid book have described how much they learned from participating in the FA concert(s). Although they originally wanted to participate for compassionate reasons (and in some cases to get on board for a cause that their hero Willie Nelson believed in—and I am sure, although they would not admit it, for the public exposure), they came away from the experience with new information that charged them up politically and also motivated them to make politically informed lifestyle choices (eschewing McDonald's while on the road in favor of getting family farm-grown and/or organic foods, looking into biodiesel fuel, etc.). Through compassion, they have become politicized and in some cases they continue to work to spread the word outside the concert itself. This sort of grassroots aspect of mega-concerts like Farm Aid seems to me another great advantage of charity concerts that are ongoing.

**Reply to Holly George-Warren Posted by Susan Fast on April 22, 2005, 8:49 P.M.**

I think it is very interesting to begin to look at charity rock in terms of what individual artists do or have done, as Holly has outlined in her post. Geldof may have wanted “politics” to stay out of the Band Aid and Live Aid projects, and the press may have railed against Live Aid for not keeping “the cause” up front, but if one looks at, for example, the MTV broadcast of that concert, “the cause” was incredibly up front. About every half hour, Sally Field came on with a prerecorded spot about the famine in Ethiopia; politicians, businessmen, world leaders, and others appeared in pretaped spots talking about how important it is to give to this cause. Granted, this was happening outside the immediate context of the live performances, but there were also moments in individual performer's sets where the politics of the day were foregrounded. Bowie, remember, cut a song he was going to perform in order that he might use some of his allotted time to show a short film by a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) cameraman that depicted some of the horrors of the Ethiopian famine for which money was being raised. And how does one disentangle the celebrity's appearance at these events and the cause, even when each and every one of them does not mention the cause in some overt way? (I have to agree with Will, by the way, that it seems less important that the celebrities who appear at these events are getting some free air time than the fact that they are there supporting the

cause.) How do we judge the performer's intent? Do we place the individual performances outside the frame of "the cause?" Do we forget what we are watching?

Simon's point about these events now being more about "them" caught my attention because Karen and I have looked at this quite closely in our work (a piece on the Canadian post-9/11 benefit concert *Music without Borders Live* in which we deal with this issue will appear in the pages of *JPMS* shortly). In some cases the concerts are about "them," people other than those performing or organizing the concert. But the US 9/11 concerts were less about "them," certainly very different from a Live Aid, for instance. And where do the Farm Aid concerts fall in terms of this us/them dichotomy? The *kinds* of artists who participate in these concerts map their performative identities onto the cause in some way, do they not? If not, then why does not Beyonce play Farm Aid (I may regret this comment, because I am not sure what the lineups have been . . . Someone correct me if I am wrong about this).

I heard a timely piece on the CBC radio news this evening that ties, obliquely, into Simon's comment about the lasting or long-term effects of "rock activism": Bono is apparently very upset with Paul Martin, the Canadian prime minister, because in the budget that was recently tabled, there is far less money going to foreign aid than our prime minister promised Bono there would be. A word of explanation is probably for the non-Canadians in this discussion. Bono appeared at the Liberal Party's convention last year, praising Martin for his commitment to foreign aid, especially aid for Africa, Bono's primary charity cause in the last few years. Money could not buy, of course, the clout that this gave Martin with a certain segment of voters. There was also some hype around Bono and the Prime Minister recently, when U2 announced that at Martin's request, they would play a gig in Ottawa, Canada's capital city. Now, Bono is on the radio—and perhaps television—saying how disappointed he is in Martin.

**Comments Posted by Karen Pegley on April 23, 2005, 10:39 A.M.**

I would like to respond to two points made in the postings. First, in Reebee's opening statement he differentiated between post-9/11 concerts like *Tribute to Heroes* and the *Concert for New York City* which were about healing and nation-building, from various alternatives including the Canadian *Music without Borders* concert. I would argue (alongside Susan)

that the Canadian concert was equally political: rather than create a clear, deprived “other” as was done in the American concerts (particularly the *Concert for New York City*), the Canadian performance identified with the “real” victims of the attacks, the Afghani people (as articulated by Jean Chrétien, then Canadian prime minister in a prevideotaped message to the nation shown at the top of the show). And who would argue against a fundraiser in the face of the Afghani refugees’ overwhelming need in October of 2001? As the program unfolded, however, Canadians championed themselves as the savior of these unprotected people—the underdogs—and Canada’s peacekeeping agenda—a cornerstone of our political self-identity—was held up as admirable and necessary. This, in turn, served to a) separate us from the United States as having our own, more noble position in the world and b) prepare us for and indeed justify Canada’s upcoming peacekeeping role in Afghanistan. In this sense the Borders concert resembled the *Concert for New York City*, which, as Susan pointed out, forged militaristic bonds between the United States and the United Kingdom through the musical performances and visual effects (for instance, the flags appearing alongside one another as a unified front). In the Borders concert, political design (conscious or not) was much more subtle, which, in my mind, makes it more dangerous. Whether the Borders concert was conceived as political is not the point for me: the final product was, like the other concerts, very politically motivating.

Second, Billy mentioned that there is not much politics involved in doing a tsunami benefit: it is a matter of compassion. I feel differently here, for while the politics might be downplayed, they can certainly be implicit and effective. (Yet) another Canadian example that fostered these sorts of politics was a production by the CBC on January 13, 2005, entitled *Canada for Asia*. Here, Canadian self-identity was again subtly reinforced: most people with whom I watched the concert thought it was typical Canadian fare, but on closer examination, the links between white male rock performers and the importance of hockey within Canadian culture were unambiguous. Only one third of the performers that night were women (not atypical), but large segments of the concert indeed were women-free and fraternity-like (for instance, one segment featured actor Mike Myers introducing Rush, followed by CBC hockey personality Ron McLean, Prime Minister Paul Martin, Wayne Gretzky, rockers The Tragically Hip, etc.). This concert featured long stretches with no women and no people of color; whereas male celebrities asked for money and introduced bands they have always loved, females were most often relegated

to tell the stories of the tsunami devastation, placing them (once again) in the realm of the emotional, unconnected to the performers. These are highly political statements, endorsed by the government-funded CBC, about what is important in Canada (hockey, rock, whiteness, or maleness) and how the rest of us should exist in relation to that narrative. So when we talk about politics, I believe we need to open up the discussion to how various national narratives work to normalize uneven power relations for those in their viewing audience.

**Comments Posted by Susan Fast on April 24, 2005, 2:26 P.M.**

I want to return to Reebee's opening statement, specifically his comments about whether current discussions around the regulation of music are part of the legacy of charity rock. I think these are quite different. The debates surrounding music downloading, for example, strike me as falling into the long tradition of popular music artists struggling for control over the music they produce, including attempts to get around working with major labels; this certainly predates charity rock. I am not even sure I had put this in the category of "activism," but I would like to hear what others think of this.

Another significant difference is that charity rock is about an event that unfolds in a particular temporal and geographic (and/or mediated) space. The form of these spectacles is important to take into account; they do their cultural work in a particular, performative way. And they are events that are staged in response to discrete world events, mostly of a catastrophic kind.

That being said, I wonder whether anyone else feels a sense of fatigue around benefit concerts and whether they have become less powerful mechanisms for raising awareness and perhaps also money. It is so predictable now that following a tragic event in the world there will be a benefit concert to raise money; they seem less precious than they did in the 1980s. I felt this way in particular around the Tsunami benefit concerts that were recently televised in Canada. The form was the same as it has always been (since Live Aid): artists playing their hits interspersed with information about the affected region and so on. The same artists who always play these kinds of concerts appeared once again. Perhaps part of what made Live Aid and the other benefit concerts of the 1980s so potent was that they were staged as an intervention, in response to government doing little or nothing about humanitarian or political crises. The 9/11 and



Tsunami benefit concerts were so different from this; they brought together politicians and musicians, both working toward the same goal. In fact it is striking how, in the 9/11 concerts, the musicians towed the government's line so, for example, we suddenly have those rebellious Who songs, which were originally about giving the finger to "the system" pressed into the service of "the system."

**Comments Posted by Simon Frith on April 24, 2005, 6:40 P.M.**

One thing clear from this discussion is that the term "politics" is being used to describe some rather different activities.

I'd read a "political concert" as meaning a concert that has some sort of relationship with a social movement—Steve Earle is an excellent example or one could cite Fugazi and the Washington DC scene.

Susan and Karen take "political concert" to mean a concert that involves some sort of ideological expressions or effect.

In both cases there is a relationship between musicians' actions and audience's feelings, between musicians' feeling and audience's actions, a relationship constructed by the music, but I think the relationships described here (the relationships of music and politics) are rather different.

Will and Tiffiniy raise a whole lot of other questions about the politics of the music business. This seems to me complicated because there are so many ways in which musicians may make a living:

- As workers for hire, skilled laborers (often self-employed, often unionized— as in orchestras), involved primarily in employee/employer relations (Will's labor issues).
- As artists, authors (composers/performers) having to deal with publishers of various sorts in contractual relations, interested not only in rights protection to their works but also in creative freedom.
- As stars, celebrities (brands) having a symbiotic relation with the corporations that market them.
- As entrepreneurs, running their own enterprises (labels etc) in a competitive relation with other producers.

Are there ways in which solidarity between musicians can transcend such differences? Filesharing, etc. do seem to offer quite new possibilities of musical relations not constrained by corporate practice.

**Comments posted by Karen Pegley on April 25, 2005, 10:38 A.M.**

I would like to post a closing thought on our varying notions of “political.” Simon noted that he read a “political concert” as one that is related to a social movement and understood Susan’s and my interpretation of this term to be a concert that expressed ideological content. I agree with Simon’s definition of a “political concert,” but I think our take on this (if I may speak on Susan’s behalf here too) is that the concerts on which we spoke are not “political concerts” per se, but rather concerts that, like any concert, have potential political effects. If “politics” can be defined as the practice of forming or administering states (or other units), then I would argue that these concerts were important events where gender, race and ethnicity, “us,” the “other” and so on were made clear for us and where our roles were powerfully modeled. It was a way of restoring order following extreme social disorder. I do not wish to suggest that this was deliberate, or even conscious on the part of the producers, performers, and so on, but nevertheless defining who we were as gendered, racial, national, ethnic beings was critical in these moments and they followed through. It was striking to watch, for instance, *America: A Tribute to Heroes* where males were defined and described as heroic and active, whereas women were nurturing, caring, and so on, where Americans were united in standing for X, while Canadians were simultaneously told that we must believe in Y. This to me is political: it is a type of social modeling that may not be related to a social movement but is directly related to the distribution of social/political power, in which the central importance of white, English-speaking males was once again reaffirmed.

**Reply to Karen Pegley and Susan Fast Posted by Will Straw on April 25, 2005, 10:53 A.M.**

Karen and Susan—do you know David Howes’ analysis of the US and Canadian Ethiopian charity songs, which tries to argue (with very limited success, in my view) that the structure of each song is homologous to the constitution or political system of each of those nations? In other words, “We Are the World” was about individual voices in sequence; the Canadian song was about living together in harmony. (I am probably caricaturing David’s argument, but I am away from home and do not have the piece with me.)

We need not buy that kind of analysis, but each charity event does offer an image of cultural community and stand as a symptom of each

country's place within a jumble of international relations. I thought the invitation to the Stones to headline the SARS conference was one more humiliation for Torontonians (and, by association, for Canadians), who endlessly fantasize about a special relationship to the Stones and never stop milking the Stones' very occasional claims of affection for Toronto. Only in Canada, although, could one imagine an event like the Toronto *Canada for Asia* concert, which brought together Margaret Atwood, cranky hockey announcer Don Cherry, Rush and Celine Dion (via satellite hook-up from Las Vegas), along with the expected Canadian movie stars, now successful in Hollywood, who are pulled back to host award shows or gala concerts. As Karen points out, this was a very white (and Anglophone) event. The drive to involve people known to most of the audience (and thus overcome the fragmentation of current music) is one of the factors that leads to these events being dominated by older performers often past their prime (who tend, in Canada at least, to be whiter than those selling their music now).

Anyone close to my age and living in North America will remember how the Jerry Lewis Telethons came to seem like museums of people and styles from the wrong side of the generational divide. (Now, of course, I wish I had tapes of them all.) Unfortunately, that made the cause (muscular dystrophy) come to seem out of date. There is something about the cultures of rock and post-1960s country that lets careers and credibility survive longer, of course, than was the case for Jerry Lewis' guests. But how long can charity events present an image of national popular music aristocracies without looking irredeemably cheesy and archaic?

**Reply to Will Straw Posted by Holly George-Warren on April 25, 2005, 12:32 P.M.**

This is to reply to Will's statement: "There's something about the cultures of rock and post-1960s country that lets careers and credibility survive longer, of course, than was the case for Jerry Lewis' guests. But how long can charity events present an image of national popular music aristocracies without looking irredeemably cheesy and archaic?"

And I would also like to address points made/questions raised by Karen Pegley and Susan Fast.

From the beginning, what has been greatly effective about Farm Aid concerts is the diversity of artists who participate. They do include

artists of very different political stripes—from Toby Keith to Steve Earle—who can reach out to different segments of the vast audience and reach them on various wavelengths. Although on the whole, most artists appeal to a more “rural” rather than “urban” audience (most FA concerts have taken place in farm country), there have been exceptions, such as Kid Rock (who played in 2002). Also, every year, there are newcomers in the lineup, usually artists whom one of the board members has discovered. (Los Lonely Boys played FA in 2002 and 2003, before breaking through.) This mix of old and new artists, who cross genres, prevents the FA lineup from becoming “cheesy.” It also helps to entertain—and educate—the audience of oldsters and youngsters.

How do artists get on the FA bill? According to Willie Nelson’s longtime manager, Mark Rothbaum, many artists who cross paths with Willie—a very diverse group here, ranging from Seattle punksters the Supersuckers to country queen Lee Ann Womack—tell him they want to participate and he invites them to do so; in addition, managers and labels contact FA to pitch their artists to play at FA.

To answer Susan’s and Karen’s questions about women artists’ roles in mega-concerts, Beyonce has not played Farm Aid. Last year in Seattle, however, Kitty Jerry, a wonderful young country-soul singer who had just recorded her first album with Neil Young sideman Ben Keith, performed—along with Jerry Lee Lewis, Lucinda Williams, the female-led Trick Pony, Earle, and the board members. FA seems to make an effort to feature women artists on the bills, and they have ranged from Loretta Lynn to Susan Tedeschi, Bonnie Raitt to Martina McBride, Exene to Emmylou Harris—although white male artists have predominated among the 300-plus different artists who have performed at FA since 1985 (seventeen concerts total). I cannot comment on the reason for that. Women do play a prominent role within the organization. Also, every single artist who performs at FA pays his or her own way—they are not compensated at all, even for expenses getting to the concert.

**Reply to Holly George Warren Posted by Billy Bragg on April 28, 2005, 8:13 A.M.**

I think Holly may have touched on something when she mentioned the role of Willie Nelson in bringing artists to Farm Aid. Does a successful event need a central figure like a Willie or a Bob Geldof to make it happen—not just in terms of pulling a bill together but to act as a focus

for the media, ensuring the message of the event gets through? Is the role of convener/spokesperson crucial to the process?

I think it is also worth noting that the charity song/event is part of a long-standing tradition. Bert Lloyd, in his collection of British coal-mining ballads, "Come All Ye Bold Miners," has a whole chapter on "pit-disaster songs." These were ballads composed following a terrible loss of life at the pit which would be sung or sold in sheet music form to raise much needed funds for those widowed or orphaned by the disaster. Some of the songs he collected dated back to the mid-1800s. Due to the decline of the mining industry and the provision of state welfare, the practice seems to have died out now.

I would put these compassionate songs in a different category from the more political songs of writers such as Joe Hill.

**Reply to Billy Bragg Posted by Holly George-Warren on April 29, 2005, 9:45 A.M.**

I was intrigued to learn from Billy about the British coal-mining disaster songs from the mid-1800s. I wonder whether that tradition traveled to Appalachia along with murder ballads and other folk songs during the Scots-Irish migration and influenced Aunt Molly Jackson, the twentieth-century Kentucky coal-mine disaster balladeer.

**Closing Comment by Reebee Garofalo**

Time is the main enemy of conversations like this one. Reflection on the intersection of music and politics in the current period invariably opens the door to history and leaves us with as many interesting questions as eye-opening insights. On behalf of *JPMS*, I want to thank the participants for their time, wisdom, and ability to help us understand how popular music and its mediations influence the process through which meaning is conveyed.

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